A Writing Program for Improvement

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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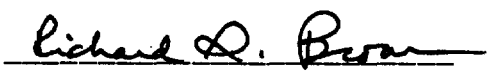

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Purpose of Thesis

There has been a great deal of research into the teaching of writing. Most of the research has focused on supposedly innovative ways to teach writing. This discussion will highlight effective ways to improve writing through sentence combining, text reconstruction, and use of a word processor. Along with the discussion of these methods and why they are effective, the failures of Writing Across the Curriculum, the process approach, and traditional grammar will be explored. Finally, a program for improvement of secondary students' writing will be presented.

The Research

Research into the teaching of writing is extensive. Library shelves are filled with it. Book after book criticizes the way writing is being taught in public schools and extols the merits of the author's pet method. Supporters of writing across the curriculum, the writing process, traditional grammar instruction, and whole language programs have written reams describing how their theories and ideals should be implemented into the teaching of composition. Few support their theories with quantitative data showing positive results. The two main factions seem to be the Writing Across the Curriculum supporters and the Process Approach supporters.

There is a complaint that children simply do not write often enough throughout all of their school classes and years. Writing Across the Curriculum, WAC, seeks to eliminate this problem. As Judith Langer and Arthur Applebee state "advocates of 'writing across the curriculum' have stressed the role of writing in learning . . . Thinking skills are taught best when related to some content . . . and writing provides a particularly welcoming context for thinking deeply about such content" (3).

One of the ideas that WAC supporters cite is "that writing is a way of discovering new knowledge, ideas, and insights" (Linden and Whimbey 66). The problem is that WAC advocates cite fiction writers as support for this idea. It is true that many fiction writers and playwrights do not know

where a story may be going until they write it. This does not work when writing in the content areas. Students do not *discover meaning* when they write a report on blue whales for science class. Most students simply accumulate information from books and articles and regurgitate the information learning only facts that they will not likely remember.

Another idea WAC supports is the keeping of a learning log, class journal, or learning notebook in which students write their thoughts about what was learned in class. The journals will not be collected for credit although the teacher may look at them occasionally to make sure students get the basic ideas (Linden and Whimbey 68-69). As with most assignments students do not take the journals seriously if they will not be graded, so WAC fails in this aspect.

The only part of WAC that Linden and Whimbey support is notetaking on textbooks (78). Notetaking during reading, especially in social studies and literature, can improve content mastery, but students are once again unlikely to take reading notes unless the teacher grades them. Linden and Whimbey suggest checking reading notes everyday using a 1-2-3 rating; the points students accumulate from this simple activity could raise grades as much as one letter grade (78).

The Process Approach supporters recognize that good writers go through a process in producing compositions: planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Stephen D. Krashen notes that studies report "good writers

differ from poor writers in their composing processes . . . Specifically, good writers differ in three ways: in planning, rescanning, and revising" (12). Krashen does not, however, necessarily encourage the instruction of these processes: " . . . Many fine writers have never consciously learned the rules for composition, and many people who have learned even valid rules and who have practised them assiduously cannot use them" (37).

Process approach supporters assume that teaching students to go through the four-step process -- prewriting, drafting, revising and writing a final draft -- will result in improved writing skills. Linden and Whimbey state, "There is one minor flaw in this four-step model of the writing process: It does not even remotely represent the real-life writing process, either regarding the motivation for writing or the detailed activities of writing" (26). In real-life good writers go through these steps, but the steps are blurred together. Prewriting usually consists of jotting down ideas and the general order for them, not brainstorming, clustering, freewriting and other false prewriting activities invented by process approach supporters. Most writers will rescan and revise their writing before they have finished the first draft. Linden and Whimbey believe that the steps in the writing process "are perhaps steps for writing a paper -- but not for teaching writing ability" (36).

The Writing Report Card, a study as part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, reports that "Students who report doing more

planning, revising, and editing are better writers than those who report doing less. However, NAEP results indicate that instruction in the writing process has little relationship to student achievement" (Applebee, Langer, and Mullis 10). Specifically, fourth grade students and eighth grade students reported no improvement with high exposure to process-oriented activities. Eighth graders with moderate exposure to the process approach showed some improvement. Eleventh graders in the study were the only ones to report any improvement with high exposure to instruction in the process approach. (Applebee, Langer and Mullis 80-81).

The process approach is failing according to this research. There are two different reasons for this failure. Process activities do not fit the purposes of writing in secondary school classrooms (Applebee Contexts 187). Most writing assignments are for evaluative purposes and therefore do not allow time for employment of all the process steps. The second reason is that the process approach should not be interpreted as a series of separate, isolated steps. When taught as such they "become just as pointless and irrelevant to student learning as the skill-and-drill activities that they were initially meant to replace" (Applebee Contexts 188).

The steps in the process approach should be introduced to students. Some will benefit while some will simply be reviewing what they already do on their own. As the research states, however, the process approach should not be taught as separate steps and as the prescribed way students

should write.

Grammar, called "the Ineffectual Monster" by Linden and Whimbey (5), continues to be taught in schools everywhere although it has never been proven to improve writing. Krashen cites several studies in his research:

> The research strongly suggests that grammar instruction is not effective in helping students to write. Elley *et al* (1976) compared three groups of high school students in New Zealand: one group studied traditional grammar in English classes, a second studied transformational grammar, and a third studied no grammar. No differences in writing performance were found in their three year study. Bambert, cited earlier, reported that good and poor freshman writers at UCLA did not differ with respect to the amount of grammar and mechanics they studied in high school English (12).

Linden and Whimbey cite a 1963 NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) survey of research on the teaching of writing:

> . . . in view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing . . . (6).

They go on to cite a more recent NCTE survey that stated that schools that insist on teaching traditional grammar "cannot defend it as a means of improving the quality of writing" (Linden and Whimbey 6). In light of this research teachers cannot defend the teaching of traditional grammar as a

tool in teaching writing.

Writing Across the Curriculum, writing process instruction and traditional grammar are not shown to be effective for improving students' writing. So why are they being implemented so widely? Perhaps teachers should reconsider the reasons for the methods they use and examine whether the methods are working in their classes. Should teachers find that their adopted methods are not working, sentence combining and text reconstruction could be examined as methods to improve writing.

Sentence combining calls for students to combine simple sentences into longer more complex sentences. Sentence combining "teaches students to weigh ideas and to connect them in ways that indicate their relationships" (Kalkstein 48). By learning to combine sentences, students also learn what options they have as writers. Given a list of sentences, students can combine them in numerous ways. Here is a sample list:

Jane is scared of dogs.
Jane was bit by a dog.
Jane was bit when she was very young.
Jane was bit by a German shepherd.
The German shepherd was big.

The students can combine these in many ways:

Jane is scared of dogs because she was bit by a big German shepherd when she was very young.

Because Jane was very young when she was bit by a big German shepherd, she is scared of dogs.

Jane was bit by a big German Shepherd when she was very young,

so she is scared of dogs.

When Jane was very young she was bit by a big German shepherd, and now she is scared of dogs.

The combinations are virtually endless.

Lessons in sentence combining generally take two forms: cued sentence combining and open sentence combining. In cued sentence combining students find clues to guide them in combining their sentences.

1. I am allergic to cats. (EVEN THOUGH . . .,)
2. They are still my favorite pets.

Answer:

Even though I am allergic to cats, they are still my favorite pets.

Cued assignments can be as simple as changing a positive sentence to a negative:

1. James did well on the chemistry test. (NEG)

Answer:

James didn't do well on the chemistry test.

Cued assignments can also be very complex as in this example from Frank O'Hare's NCTE research report:

1. SOMETHING irritated the men.
2. Connie constantly chattered. ('S + ~~LY~~ + ING)
3. The chattering kept the hunters from hearing something. (WHICH/THAT)
4. The dogs were running someplace. (WHERE)
5. The men swore SOMETHING. (WHO)
6. They would never take her hunting again. (THAT)

Answer:

Connie's constant chattering, which kept the hunters from hearing where the dogs were running, irritated the men, who swore

that they would never take her hunting again. (O'Hare 89)

As long as students follow the cues, they can't combine erroneously. The students learn different ways to subordinate thoughts and can incorporate these methods into their own writing.

Open sentence combining does not guide the student. Students are given a list of simple sentences and asked to combine them into a more effective, interesting sentence. Students use their own creativity and knowledge of sentence structures to combine sentences. Open sentence combining can also be simple or complex.

Simple:

1. The girl dropped her ice cream cone.
2. The girl was upset.

Answer:

The girl was upset because she dropped her ice cream cone.

Complex:

1. The dog barked.
2. The barking scared the baby.
3. The baby started crying.
4. The baby had to be comforted.

Answer:

The dog barked scaring the baby who started crying and had to be comforted.

Students may have diverse answers to open sentence combining assignments. All of their answers can be discussed in class demonstrating how differently the sentences can be combined. Generally, every student's answer will be correct. Some combinations will result in slightly different

meanings and show students that they must be careful when combining their own sentences so that they will not be misunderstood. When students see the options that they have, they learn to appreciate the richness and flexibility of the English language and may become more enthusiastic writers.

The most persuasive research supporting sentence combining as a way of improving student writing was compiled by Frank O'Hare. In the study two groups of seventh grade students were given traditional writing instruction while two experimental groups of seventh grade students were instructed in sentence combining.

After eight months the two groups' compositions were rated independently and then compared against each other and normative data. "When compared with the normative data presented by Hunt (1965), the experimental group's compositions showed evidence of a level of syntactic maturity well beyond that typical of eighth graders and in many respects quite similar to that of twelfth graders . . . it was concluded that the experimental group wrote compositions that were significantly better in overall quality than the control group's compositions" (O'Hare 67-68).

The implications for writing instruction are staggering. Use of a sentence combining method that did not rely on students' knowledge of any traditional grammar improved students' writing from the seventh grade level to a level comparable to twelfth grade in just *eight months!*

The merits of sentence combining are many as have been stated. But although students may learn to write beautiful sentences, sentence combining may not help students put together effective paragraphs. At this point a method called text reconstruction may prove useful.

Kalkstein notes that a good paragraph must have unity, "as it grows outward, free of irrelevancies from a single central idea"; coherence "from a logical ordering of ideas . . . and from an effective use of transitional words and phrases"; and emphasis which is "chiefly the result of the placement of a central idea" (60). Students can learn how to put together these elements by reconstructing well-written paragraphs whose individual sentences have been listed out of order. Here is an example from Analyze, Organize, Write, a workbook for expository writing:

> Exercise 1. Number the sentences to form the best logical order.
>
> ____ Without looking up from his paper, he replied automatically, "Yes, dear. Thank you, dear."
>
> ____ Serving him some pancakes, she said, "Have several. I filled them with cockroaches."
>
> ____ She barely heard her husband when he asked her for another piece of toast or something.
>
> ____ A woman decided to test whether her husband heard anything she said when he had his head buried in the paper during breakfast.
>
> ____ She just replied, "Sure, dear," and read on.
>
> ____ So she sat down with the editorial page and began enjoying a humorous article about the city's mayor.

> Exercise 2. Write the sentences in the order you numbered them.
>
> Exercise 3. With all material from exercises 1 and 2 out of sight, write a paragraph telling (as best you remember it) the same "Sure dear" story just told. (Whimbey and Jenkins 64)

This method allows students to learn how to put paragraphs together to achieve unity, coherence, and emphasis. Text reconstruction also allows students to see how an author strings together his ideas. Linden and Whimbey cite such authors as Benjamin Franklin and Jack London who used a method of text reconstruction to improve their own writing (39). Franklin would write down parts of articles printed in his brother's print shop, jumble them up, and then put them away. After several weeks he would try to arrange the parts into the original order. When Jack London decided he wanted to become a professional writer, he would analyze "the stories he liked, or copied them out by hand to learn how they were put together" (Linden and Whimbey 39).

Linden and Whimbey state that text reconstruction is effective with weak and average students. They consider the *before* and *after* paragraphs of some of their own students from community college basic writing classes. They state:

> "The richer development through specific details shown in the second paper comes from the constant practice in the arrangement of content in general-specific patterns provided by text reconstruction. The second paper also shows much-improved sentence structure with complex sentences replacing the simple and compound sentences of the first" (45).

About the second student's *after* paper:

> "The second sample demonstrates the student's ability to handle paragraph form. Also, in contrast to the generalities of the first, it is full of specific details . . ." (46).

Another student was learning English as a second language:

> "Instead of the scrambled constructions marred with verb errors of the first sample, in the second this student, learning English as a second language, uses sophisticated sentences with participial phrases and prepositional phrase openers. She also uses complex sentences opening and closing with adverbial clauses and demonstrates the use of cohesion devices such as 'Secondly'" (47).

These students demonstrate the correction of many problems through the practice of text reconstruction.

Text reconstruction can be used to teach a variety of writing purposes: general-specific reasoning, processes, description of a person or a place, etc. It can also improve the products of students' writing. When united with sentence combination to improve writing, the limitations lie only in the teacher's creativity and resources.

A relatively new method I'd like to touch upon briefly is called inquiry. The inquiry method requires students to examine some specific material or topic. Students may examine objects, phenomena such as odors or sounds, actions, and situations. The students must then write about the subject with as much detail as possible (Linden and Whimbey 83). Students are supplied with their topics, eliminating writer's block. They observe and report specific details, using as many of the senses as possible. This method also suggests use of small groups to discuss the subject before

writing and to critique papers after writing.

The process shows promise, but there has been little research into its effectiveness. Linden and Whimbey, however, feel that "inquiry imparts a skill for conceptualizing ideas and also the language for expressing them . . . [Inquiry method and sentence combining together] would form a solid foundation for any composition class" (88).

Once teachers get students to write quality papers, another problem they face is persuading students to revise their papers. Many students will simply recopy when asked to revise, changing only misspellings, punctuation, and maybe a word or two. Instruction in the use of a word processor to compose may change that.

Gwen Solomon states that "the easiest way for children to learn how to write well is with a computer" (5). Children can focus on their writing problems and fix them without the hassle of recopying. Solomon also believes that word processing "releases their creativity . . . they can be spontaneous. They can write ideas in any order, move them into a more logical sequence later . . . insert punctuation or improve grammar" (6).

Standiford, Jaycox, and Auten laud the merits of word processing for composition:

> "Those who opt to use a computer as a writing tool cite a number of benefits from doing so, in both composing and revising strategies. Initial writing blocks are overcome . . . . Mechanical difficulties with poor handwriting and spelling are overcome . . . causing writers to be

> more relaxed about putting words down . . . writers are more open to suggestions for change and less inhibited about implementing suggestions" (23).

Rick Monroe considers a computer to be a great motivation for students:

> "When a student writes using a computer, ideas flow from the student's mind to the keyboard to the screen. The words dance across the monitor as the student writes, the cursor blinking incessantly, urging the student to continue. Because words are so easily moved and removed from the screen, the student is not as stubborn about editing his or her writing. Changing something simply is not as laborious as it used to be" (2).

Monroe's description may be a bit flowery, but it is based on fact. In my own experience as a writer, I have come to appreciate the wonders of word processing. Writing *is* much easier. If I don't like something, I can backspace to it or, even more quickly, use a mouse to highlight the text I want to change, delete, cut or paste.

As a student teacher I also observed the way a word processor motivates students to write. On Wednesdays our remedial students would have the opportunity of using the computer lab. Many would play word games designed to improve spelling and reading skills, but others chose the simplistic word processing program. These students created signs for their rooms or lockers, wrote letters, and even wrote short stories without being required to do so for an assignment. Although I did not have the opportunity to assign them to write using the computer, I think my students -- or any writing students-- would have responded positively.

The main problem with computer use for instruction seems to be access. Many school systems cannot afford more than a few computers for an entire secondary school or only one or two per classroom. A teacher would encounter quite a bit of trouble trying to devise a schedule for students use.

Other access problems arise at schools that can afford enough computers for a lab, but limit classes to one hour in the lab per week. These problems can be overcome. Students may spend the lab hour composing, then take the printed copy home to consider revision. The students mark what should be changed, deleted, moved, etc., and then at the next opportunity -- whether after school or during weekly computer lab hour -- the students revise on the computer.

Difficulties should be overcome if at all possible. Word processing will open up many opportunities and options to students. They can consider their options, get peer feedback without a formal group, implement suggestions without tedious recopying, and consult the teacher informally. This last may especially appeal to some students. Rather than a formal consultation about the progress of an essay, a student can simply raise a hand and the teacher can answer specific questions and quickly check the composition.

The Program

In designing a writing program for my own classroom use, I considered the pros and cons of all of the methods outlined in the research portion of this paper. My program would unite intensive sentence combining practice, some text reconstruction practice, inquiry method to stimulate students' writing, and use of word processing in the actual composition process. This particular program is designed for middle school students, but can easily be adapted for high school students.

The beginning of a course in writing usually requires a diagnostic

essay; however, instead of requiring students to begin writing upon stepping inside my classroom, I would first ask students to complete an interest inventory. The interest inventory would tell me what students interests are, what they are experts on (because of a hobby), what they might like to investigate to learn more, and what they like to read. I can use these interest inventories not only to learn more about my students, but also to remind them of things they might be able to write about.

Of course, sometime in the first few days students would have to write a diagnostic essay so I will be able to identify specific grammatical problems for specific students. The diagnostic essay topic may be as trite as "What I Did This Summer" since the topic itself is basically irrelevant in a diagnostic essay of this sort, especially at the middle school level. At the high school level I may want to know more about students' specific thinking abilities (analysis, description, persuasion), but at the middle school level I would prefer to keep the topic as simple as possible just to get students to write.

Perhaps before I've even finished evaluating the diagnostic essays, students will start with an introduction to sentence combining exercises. The first exercise would consist of a list of sentences with the instruction to combine all of the sentences into one longer, more complex sentence. After students complete this exercise in class -- probably under five minutes -- I would select students, each with a different final sentence, to write their

sentences on the board. This would facilitate a discussion of the many options that students have in putting together sentences. If students put sentences together so that the meaning changed, the discussion could turn to explain that students must take care that they aren't misunderstood when they combine sentences.

After students understand what is expected of them in sentence combining, I would begin with structured cued sentence combining lessons. I must, of course, demonstrate what the different cues mean before expecting students to complete exercises on their own. The first cued exercises would be as simple as changing positive to negative and changing verb tenses. As students learn to use the cues, the lessons would become more complex with students making compound subjects and predicates and joining simple sentences with coordinating conjunctions. From there students learn to use conjunctive adverbs, correlative conjunctions, etc., without having to know the terms for the linguistic elements they are using.

After they had learned to use single, simple combining cues, I would introduce them to multiple, complex cued exercises. Once they are comfortable with their options in sentence combining, I would require more open sentence combining exercises.

Along with this intense sentence combining practice, students will periodically write compositions using the inquiry approach. Before the

first post-diagnostic assignment, however, I would conduct a short lesson on the writing process. I would outline the steps and encourage students to use them, but I would also emphasize that these are not separate steps that a writer must go through in a specific order. I would explain that all good writers go through these steps, but they overlap and rewind as they go through the process.

Returning to the topic of assignments, using the inquiry method I would supply students in small groups with different objects that they can see, touch, smell, possibly hear, and in some instances even taste. They would be expected to write well-developed paragraphs describing the object. As they progress in their writing abilities, they will learn to move from paragraph writing to essay writing. The topics will vary, but their will be an emphasis on topics in which the students can become actively and personally involved.

Interspersed throughout the program will be text reconstruction lessons. The first would be completed before the first post-diagnostic writing assignment. Some of the assignments will be co-operative -- groups of students given sentences that must be put into a logical order -- while others will be individual assignments. All of the text reconstruction paragraphs will model the kinds of paragraphs to be expected in future assignments. If a lesson on writing descriptions of people were coming, the students would first complete a few text reconstruction exercises that

contained paragraphs describing people.

If my students have computer access, I would prefer that they do as much composing as possible on a word processor. It might be useful to use the word processors on "diagnostic essay day" if the class has access to an entire lab of computers. Then I would be able to learn not only how well they write, but also how much computer knowledge they possess and assess whether composition on word processors would be feasible for a particular class.

I realize that if computer access is limited to use of a lab on a particular day, I will have to schedule writing assignments around the lab time and hope that there will be another time available for students to finish incomplete essays. If my students' computer access is limited to only a few computers in the classroom, my students will have to do much more composing by hand and perhaps use the computers for important projects or final drafts. For computer composition to really be effective, however, it would be ideal to have unlimited access to a number of computers. A pipe-dream? Perhaps, but one that may be worth pursuing to help my students' writing skills improve.

Based on the data I've cited and the other research that I've investigated, this program should work. Although it is based primarily on other individuals' research and my limited experience, I believe it will result in improved writing from middle school and high school students. I

look forward to implementing as much of this program as possible as my teaching career begins. If the program shows positive results, I will be contacting the National Council of Teachers of English of which I plan to become a member.

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